

72-50057

21 SEP 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR: Assistant Deputy Director for Intelligence

SUBJECT : Vietnam Reporting

REFERENCE : Blind Memorandum of 18 August 1972, Subj:
OCI's Treatment of South Vietnam's Per-
formance in Reacting to the Communist
Spring Offensive

1. A goodly part of my problem with the impact (a word I prefer to "tone") of our reporting is based on the point made in the attached memorandum at paragraph three:

"In view of the fundamental intelligence mission, the reporting devoted greater attention and space to North Vietnamese and Viet Cong initiatives, deployments and logistics than to South Vietnamese counteractions."

2. I fully recognize that the traditional job of the intelligence officer is to report on the enemy and leave the operations officer to report on the friendlies. For two reasons I do not think this an adequate way of handling the present problem in Vietnam:

a. The friendlies are not U.S. troops with a full operational reporting system. Rather, they are primarily foreign troops and a proper subject for intelligence coverage.

b. Our President's need from CIA is for a total view of the situation, not just part of the picture. To put it mildly, he is deeply interested in what the South Vietnamese are doing on their side, as well as the activities and plans of their enemies. I realize you did not ignore or minimize South Vietnamese action and successes and that our President is also interested in South Vietnamese deficiencies. At the same time, I believe the function of our reporting is to provide a solid, objective, total look which can be relied upon independent of whatever sensational line the press reports may be taking at any one time. Maybe what you

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need is some kind of format that carefully distinguishes actual events on the ground on both sides, plans and potentials on both sides, and an estimate as to the likely developments in the short term. I don't mean to "balance" a presentation when the facts are not in balance, nor in any way project anything but a totally objective view of what has (or has not) happened, what is planned, and what is likely to happen, on both sides.

3. An aspect of our reporting which particularly concerns me stems from the position you take in paragraph one above. The daily summaries repeatedly refer to Communist plans and actions, reflecting all their initiatives. Considerably less prominence, however, is given the fact that many of these initiatives failed, that broad hopes were quite unrealistic or that large regions were untouched or merely harassed rather than placed in jeopardy. An example is the coverage of the "delta," by which one would think we referred to all the provinces therein. It is only by the closest attention to the small print, however, that I conclude that the Communist initiatives and actual accomplishments there have really only affected two areas (the Northern U Minh and Base Area 470 and vicinity) and that even there the government's writ still seems to run despite the alarums and excursions of the past six months of our reports. The recurrent mortaring and overrunning of government outposts (followed by a morning reoccupation by government forces) even there has not appeared to have had a substantially different effect in recent months from what it has had over the past two years. I believe that our customers deserve our help in making an overall assessment of the likely course of the contest, not merely warnings of what the enemy would like to do. In fact, I think the picture drawn from our reports is certainly not the "whole truth," although it certainly contained individual truths.

4. If the problem is still a lack of detailed coverage of the "operational" side of the coin, I suggest it is our obligation to seek it.

WEC

W. E. Colby
Executive Director-Comptroller

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Executive Director

SUBJECT: Vietnam Reporting

Bill, -
Sometime ago you suggested I might look into our daily reporting on the NVA offensive to see if there was any validity to charges from some quarters that our reporting reflected a certain amount of panic. The attached is a result of a survey made by one of the senior and highly objective officers in OCI who has played no role in current Vietnam reporting, although he has broad knowledge of the area. I have complete confidence in his professionalism and his judgment, and I find his evaluation to be most reassuring.

Paul V. Walsh
Acting DDI

18 Sept 1972
(DATE)

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18 August 1972

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: OCI's Treatment of South Vietnam's Performance
in Reacting to the Communist Spring Offensive

1. OCI's daily and weekly publications and memoranda in the two months following the beginning of the spring offensive have been examined with a view to determining whether the coverage of military developments could be said to have discounted the capacity of South Vietnamese armed forces to cope with the North Vietnamese drive. Our publications did not at any point portray the North Vietnamese forces as invincible, nor did they call into question South Vietnamese ability to stand up to the new offensive. Reporting in all these publications was essentially straightforward and factual. The coverage ventured no "big picture" generalizations with regard to the capabilities and prospects of the opposing sides. Each phase of combat was treated in a quite narrow tactical frame that carefully eschewed judgments regarding the ultimate outcome of the offensive. The nearest approach to articulating an overall "net assessment" appeared in the PDB and CIB [] and in the Weekly Review []. These articles, noting that both sides had now committed most of their available reserves, concluded with the judgment that, "The opposing armies are still both a long way from being 'fought out.' Both sides are regrouping for more action and both have many units that have not yet been seriously damaged or even involved to any great extent in the fighting."

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2. Reporting in the early days of the offensive described in detail the magnitude of the main force threat facing the South Vietnamese. The CIB [], for example, commented that the North Vietnamese buildup along the borders of each military region in the South "gives the Communists the capability of attacking in strength along widely separate fronts, a course that could severely complicate the South Vietnamese task of reinforcing endangered positions." But this article made no judgments with regard to the South's capacity to meet

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the threat. The Weekly Review [] noted that the South Vietnamese were rushing reinforcements to Quang Tri from the Saigon area and that "they evidently intend to make a major effort to contain the North Vietnamese advance."

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3. In view of the fundamental intelligence mission, the reporting devoted greater attention and space to North Vietnamese and Viet Cong initiatives, deployments and logistics than to South Vietnamese counteractions. But South Vietnamese actions and successes were by no means ignored or minimized. At the end of the first week of the strike across the DMZ, the PDB and CIB reported that the South Vietnamese "have been holding their defensive lines" near Dong Ha, Quang Tri and Hue. The publications [] noted that South Vietnamese defenses were stiffening in the north, the highlands, and along the Cambodian border north of Saigon. The Weekly Review [] noted that South Vietnamese commanders had claimed a number of battle-field successes and were expressing confidence that they could contain the enemy assaults if US air support continued. As for the domestic front, this article commented that, "In Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, popular morale appears to have risen in recent days as South Vietnamese forces have checked the enemy advance."

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4. Balance and responsible reporting, however, required some attention to deficiencies in the South Vietnamese performance as these appeared. In April, these centered primarily on the siege of An Loc. The CIB [] observed that, "The uninspired performance so far of the 21st ARVN division and the airborne brigade leading the relief column suggests that it may have great difficulty extricating itself from the area without taking very heavy losses." On the 21st, the publications called attention to the worsening situation at An Loc and stated that South Vietnamese commanders "who had been fairly optimistic about the battle of a few days ago are now in a gloomy mood."

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5. The impact of the fall of Quang Tri City on 1 May was also reported in some detail. The CIB [] noted growing concern in Saigon about the general military situation and about rumors of a peace agreement arranged by the great powers. It reported that President Thieu "is skeptical about the chances for organizing an effective defense line north of Hue." Two days later, however, the publications noted efforts by Thieu to provide more vigorous and competent

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leadership for some of the Southern forces (the replacement of General Lam in MR 1 by General Truong). The denouement at An Loc was highlighted [] CIA

[] concluded with the comment that, "Tenacious resistance by government troops--aided significantly by US advisers--and massive allied air strikes appear to have thrown Communist plans (to move on toward Saigon) out of kilter and to have inflicted heavy losses." By the end of May, the publications reported that the government defense line along the My Chanh River "appears to have stabilized" and that Communist attempts to seize Kontum City had been repulsed.

6. In sum, this record of reporting on the first phase of the spring offensive reflects high standards of objectivity and balance. The nature of the reporting mission tends to result in greater attention to Communist actions and purposes, but the South Vietnamese performance was never neglected or denigrated. In retrospect, the daily and weekly coverage of a fast-moving and sometimes confused military situation leaves the reviewer with a strong impression of the good judgment, balance, and prudence displayed by the Vietnam Task Force.

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